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A critical Analysis of social distancing as a policy to combat the Spread of Corona Virus in Zimbabwe

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Abstract. This paper critically analyses the social distancing policy adopted by many nations in the fight against Covid 19 delimiting it in the context of Zimbabwe. The concept of social distancing as a method to combat the spread of the virus is defined. The epidemiology of the disease is outlined to have an appreciation of why social distance is highly recommended during corona virus pandemic as declared by the World Health Organisation in March 2020. The application of the methods of the social distancing may be applicable to certain contexts and may not be applicable in other places. This will be assessed with reference to Zimbabwe where some of the facilities are not conducive for quarantine, isolation and lockdown. Issues of poverty, economy, social amenities and basic needs are some of the factors for consideration for social distancing and lockdown. Possible recommendations shall be given so that the country may be ready to fight the pandemics of such kind in future. For example adequate and clear guidance may be needed especially for semi- formal and informal businesses so as to protect the most vulnerable and also alternative methods be applied on schools and religious gatherings other than closures. The Government as a policy maker and enforcer need to be pro -active in the fight of the pandemic so that the implementation of lockdown and social distancing is not just mere wastage of time since the outbreak will strike regardless of that policy.

Keywords. Covid 19/Corona Virus, Policy, Pandemic, Social Distancing, Lockdown

Introduction

Social distancing has been adopted by many countries in the World as measure to reduce the spread of the deadly corona virus which has devastated the World. Covid 19 caused panic throughout the world as the number of people dying every day in Europe and beyond is alarming and increasing daily with the United States of America, Italy, Spain, France and England as the most affected. Zimbabwe is among the nations in the World to have introduced social distancing extending to the lock down as a policy to stop the fast spread of the pandemic. The social distancing encompasses a lot of measures that include non-shaking of hands, maintenance of at least 1.5 metres distance from one another, bans on social gatherings and having limited number of people per gathering and for funerals and other important gatherings. This social distancing has come with so many questions in the world and has been received with varying degrees of resistance in some sectors in the Country. This is not the same as the other policies which requires citizen engagement through parliament for introduction after debates. Social distancing is imposed on citizens because it is of public health importance. However, this paper

will critically analyse the scope of social distancing, application in Africa and in Zimbabwe in particular and its implications on the economy and its benefits in public health.

Social Distancing as a concept

Social distancing is a set of non-pharmaceutical methods that are applied by the public health officials to minimize the spread of highly contagious diseases such as the Covid 19. (Hensley, Laura.(2020). People are encouraged to keep physical distances from each other and in the case of covid 19 a distance of about 1.5 to 2 meters between people is recommended. The main purpose of this is to reduce the devastating impact a pandemic would cause on society and the medical fraternity. The methods also reduce the number of times people have contact to one another. If social distancing is highly practiced it will prevent new cases from emerging and some will never get sick until the vaccine is available. Social distancing requires that people stay at home which means people are not supposed to go for work, schools closed and no religious and social gatherings.

Physical distancing has been suggested by the World Health Organization during this outbreak of Covid 19 as an alternative to social distancing, the argument being that people remain connected socially via technology. (Tangermann Victor. (2020). The policy of social distancing is not a new phenomenon but it dates back to the 5th century BCE in the book of Leviticus chapter 13 where people with Leprosy were quarantined to prevent spread. (Drews Kelly.(2013). In modern times the Social distancing has been implemented effectively during the control of the Influenza outbreak of 1918 in St Louis who then implemented social distancing unlike in Philadelphia who allowed mass parades to continue despite having high case fatality rate until they realized that the number of cases were increasing. (Ryan, Jeffrey R (2008). When they saw their first case they continued with their mass parades of more than 200000 people and within three days their health facilities were full with the patients and within a week 4500 people died. These are lessons to learn as Zimbabweans that lockdowns and social distancing are meant for the benefit of the public health delivery system that aims to reduce the case fatality rates, morbidity and transmission. >

Epidemiology of the Covid 19

It is of paramount importance that the epidemiology of Covid 19 is explained so that we have an appreciation of why social distancing is important and should be taken seriously by governments and the general public. According to the World Health Organization in February 2020, Corona Virus disease is a highly infectious disease that is caused by severe acute respiratory corona virus. This disease was first discovered in Wuhan city in China in December 2019. (Hui D S (2020). The disease presents in humans with fever, shortness of breath and cough. In some cases fatigue, muscle pain and sore throat may be found. (United States Centers for Disease Control (2020). The corona virus has an incubation period of two to fourteen days. This is the time taken from the time of exposure to the time when the person starts to present with signs and symptoms of the virus. The disease attacks humans with varying degrees of illnesses, some will remain asymptomatic and in some people it will progress to viral pneumonia and multiple organ failure. (Huis DS et al (2020). Many people across the Globe have lost their lives due to Covid 19 so it is highly virulent in nature. By April 11 2020 it had killed more than 100000 people in the World. It is also important to note that, the virus is mainly spread between people during close contact hence the need for social distancing that reduces contact between people. Close contact according to the World Health Organisation is a distance of less than 1 meter and according to CDC it is a distance of less than 2 meters. Accordingly, the WHO guidelines are the ones that are implemented in most countries including Zimbabwe.

However the social distancing or the physical distancing makes sense when the distance is much bigger to make sure that people are not getting into contact with one another. Corona virus is a contagious droplet infection because it is spread by the droplets that are produced during cough, sneezing and talking. (WHO 2020). When an infected person coughs or sneezes without covering his or her mouth and nose with a mask there is likelihood that the infection will be passed to the next person who is in close contact with him or her. This is the reason why most of the infected people in isolation are encouraged to wear face masks as well as health workers. Droplets may be produced during breathing but they are not of any significance because they fall on the ground and may not travel for long distance to cause infection to the other person. According to the European Center for Disease Control, the virus can stay on surfaces for more 72 hours and people can be infected by getting in contact with the infected surfaces and then touching their face and the mouth. (CDC 2020). Another point that is that is also important on this disease is that there is no vaccine or cure yet so the medical practitioners will only manage symptoms. The Epidemiology of the disease and the social distancing concept will now inform the critical analysis of the policy of social distancing in a Zimbabwean context. The conditions of living of most Zimbabweans, the social amenities and the infrastructure are major areas of concern when it comes to the implementation of the policy. The following paragraphs will unpack the issues surrounding social distance in Zimbabwe.

Social Distance in the Zimbabwean Context

Zimbabwe just like any other countries in the World imposed social distancing and countrywide lockdown end of March 2020. Public health experts in the World with the help of the World Health Organization have advocated for social distancing and have pleaded with nation states and the officials to implement the noble cause of social distancing to flatten the curve of corona virus infections and also to reduce the peak caseload. (Joclyne Kaiser (2020). Public health experts and the World Health Organization are justified to encourage nations to implement social distancing in Africa and in particular Zimbabwe but they have not looked deeply in to the circumstances that may impede this noble cause. According to Christopher Adolph 2020 poor countries are less likely to adopt the social distancing policy, some have delayed or have not implemented it due to limited state economic resources and poor nations may also have the larger numbers of vulnerable people and a more fragile health delivery system. So there is no one size fits all in the fight against Corona virus. There are a number of factors that are supposed to be considered before or when implementing social distancing. Every country has its unique political, social and economic context and what is applicable in Europe may not be applicable in Zimbabwe. The reason why the nature of the spread was first discussed was to give a picture of the considerations. The norms, values and beliefs of certain people have a role to play in enforcing the precautionary measures of social distancing. (Ipsos Mori, (2020) Some members of society in Zimbabwe do not even know why public gatherings are banned and why people are not going to Church because there was no consideration of informing the general public about the pandemic. It is always very prudent when trying to mitigate the spread of the virus to consider what could be the public reaction or the anticipated response to social distancing. In Zimbabwe we have seen police and the army beating up people who will be loitering in the streets when they are supposed to be at home. This has not happened in Zimbabwe alone but in other countries like South Africa and even Europe. Instead of educating the general public we end up infringing their rights. (United Nations, Economic and Social Council (UNESCO). People must understand first why certain measures are being taken and the possible challenges people are likely to face should be taken into considerations and the possible ways of alleviating such challenges.

The reasons for being quarantined or isolated through social distancing has been to stop or limit the spread of the virus but it is important to note that some people in Zimbabwe have been isolated or quarantined in high transmission settings. Social distancing should not discriminate between social and economic groups in a population but it has to be applicable to all. (Gonsalves G, 2020 et al). The rationale and justification of social distancing should be well communicated and people must be encouraged to take action at personal levels. This has been happening in Zimbabwe were the Health officers in the Ministry of Health move around educating people about the need for social distancing and personal hygiene. According to the European Centre for Disease Control there should be a monitoring mechanism in place to ensure that the social distancing measures are being followed.

While the social distancing policy is vital for the control of the pandemic there are so many things that remain unattended to in Zimbabwe. Social distancing comes with measures that do not allow people to do their work. DiGiovanni C, Conley J et al postulated that there should be a support system for the people and communities subjected to quarantine and social distancing such as lock down to facilitate compliance and to the social distancing measures and this support system should be well communicated to the people and communities. (DiGiovanni C, Conley J 2004) This should be a very important consideration in the context of poor countries and Zimbabwe included. Many of the people in Zimbabwe live from hand to mouth and do not have financial reserves that can cushion them during the lock down aimed at achieving social distancing. Informal traders are hard hit by the social distancing policy because they are not able to go for work and it has posed difficulties for the law enforcement agencies to implement social distancing as they are faced with resistance. Police end up using force on the citizens because some of them would say it is better to die of corona virus than hunger. In the context of Zimbabwe there are limited resources to fully implement the requirements of social distancing. There must be a way that the government should enforce to ensure that people stay at home. One fact that is undisputable is that human beings cannot be forced to stay at home where there is no food. What kind of support is the government rendering to the people is the question that we should ask ourselves for ease of implementation of this noble cause. This policy should go beyond just enforcing but to provide people with food, medication and other basic needs otherwise it will be a mere wastage of time. Recently in Sakubva in Mutare the minister of state was launching the distribution of mealie meal to the community and names of ZANUPF supporters were the only ones given the mealie meal. When such things happen we are not only killing the nation but helping the spread of the virus. There should not be people thinking politically when dealing with a global pandemic such as corona virus. Developed countries such as America and the UK and others have been providing the vulnerable communities with some financial aid so that people are able to stay at home but in Zimbabwe vulnerable people have not been receiving any aid from the Government but only forced to stay at home. Before the onset of corona virus the majority of the people were living from hand to mouth regardless of the field of employment. The only people who have been coping up with inflation are those whose salaries are in US dollars. The majority of the government workers and those in the health sectors do not even have any savings worth to take them through the period of lock down. The corona virus added petrol to an already burning house and the prices of basic commodities continue to rise impacting negatively on the lives of the people under lockdown.

The Small and medium enterprises are the engines of the economy in many countries in the World including Zimbabwe. The social distancing policy and its measures which are meant to limit the spread of the corona virus has some ripple effects on the survival and functioning

of the Small and Medium Enterprises. If we are to take China as an example, the SMEs contributes 60% of China's Gross Domestic Product and more than 50% tax come from the SMEs. (EU SME Centre, SMEs in China :). If the government implement social distancing measures without properly thinking of ways to help the SMEs to survive it will be disastrous to the economy and the employees of those small businesses. The SMEs in Zimbabwe are facing financial pressure especially as they think of how they will pay salaries, employees insurances, and social security. (<https://www.mbachina.com/html/tsinghua/202002/214377.html>).. The World Health Organisation has been at the forefront in investigating Covid 19 pandemic in China at its onset. (WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019). WHO has not been very active in Africa ever since the first cases were reported in the continent despite warning Africans that they could experience worse scenarios in the next couple of weeks. This is in line with the need to offer financial aid to developing countries so that they survive during this global pandemic. In some countries like China they have been able to put measures to help their small companies survive during the lockdown period. In China the official interest rates of borrowing were reduced by a quarter to 2.5% and banks were ordered to postpone interest payment on loans to SMEs that facing cash flow challenges until the end of June. (Alison Tudor-Ackroyd, (2020). The local policy makers were encouraged by the central government to provide financial support to keep SMEs afloat, for instance Beijing even went further to suspend rentals for a period of 2 months reducing tax and contributions to National social security. (Xinhua News Agency. (2020). In an already struggling economy in Zimbabwe, where SMEs are not supported , the social distancing and lock down may not yield the intended results In Business times Zimbabwean newspaper, The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions highlighted that Corona virus poses a serious threat to the wellbeing workers and citizens which will affect productivity and demand, and the lockdown has affected all value chains as well as destroying livelihoods, it went on to say it has mainly destroyed those in the informal sector. (Zimbabwe Times 15 April 2020).

Lock down and social distancing must be coupled with many other migratory factors such as treasury support for the survival of the citizens. Zimbabwe is not capacitated to deal with the demands of social distancing. It is reported in the *Newsday* April 13 2020 that the Minister of Health disclosed that the Treasury is yet to release COVI 19 funds which are meant to buy the Personal Protective Equipment to be used by the Health Care Nurses. Imagine if the country cannot buy the PPE what more the support of the people's livelihoods during the lockdown and social distancing. Countries such as China and other European nations have assisted their vulnerable people access basic needs while on lock down. In Zimbabwe most of the SMEs are informal and not registered and cannot access loans from the banks making it very difficult to survive under the stringent measures imposed by the Government.

The law enforcement agencies have been finding it very difficult to control the movement of people during the lock down because people have always wanted to survive and cannot spend three or four days indoors without money and food to eat. Informal traders especially farmers were hard hit by the social distancing policy and had to request that the Government lift some of the lock down measures because their produce was getting bad since buyers are not allowed to go to the market to buy agricultural produce. The Zimbabwe Republic policy destroyed agricultural produce from farmers worth thousands of dollars purporting that the farmers were disobeying the lock down rules.



Police Confiscate and Burn Vegetables (Image Credit: Herald)

The government of Zimbabwe had to allow the farmers to sell their produce for a few hours per day and Mbare and Sakubva markets were reopened and the social distancing rules were compromised leaving the people at high risk. Below is a picture showing Mbare market and Sakubva market in Mutare after reopening during the lockdown of 21 days which means Zimbabwe cannot fully implement the social distancing policies because of its poor economy that is cushioned by the informal traders and agriculture.



ZTN Reporter 7 April 2020. Mbare vegetable market during lockdown



Sakubva market place (Musika). 16 April 2020 third week during the lockdown

The policy of social distancing and lock down has also impacted negatively on the education sector in Zimbabwe. This is not meant to say it is not yielding results but the schools in Zimbabwe were closed a week before the scheduled time of closure /due to the corona virus. The social distancing and lock down for schools may have been ill timed or school children should have remained in schools and stringent measures applied. In the developed countries students continue to enjoy online education because they are advanced in technology. (Oreopoulos et al. 2006). In Africa and in Zimbabwe in particular many schools are in the remote parts of the country where there is not even electricity and mobile networks. For a country like Zimbabwe to think of offering education online is a nightmare because there are no such facilities to make sure that students continue to learn. Apart from just having social distancing and lockdown in Zimbabwe there is need for authorities to think on a system that allows students to continue with their learning by capacitating the ministry of education. The social distancing and lockdown measures are not somehow suitable for developing countries whose resources are not adequate and the result is still the same sending children home where there is no water, no food, no network and money to manage social distancing. The scenario is that children are send away from school to go home because there are fears that corona virus may spread fast when people are many and crowded. When these kids go home they are still crowded and they are exposed since their adult counterparts are mobile than them. There is no adequate water supply in Zimbabwe that can be used for hygiene purposes. Some areas go for weeks without water thereby putting the lives of the people at risk during the lockdown. Elsewhere kids are taught via online using Google classroom but in Zimbabwe we are waiting for the lifting of the lockdown by the government for the children to go back to school. (Andersen and Nielsen. (2019).

Recommendations

There is no doubt that social distancing remains the major area of focus to compact the spread of corona virus in the World in the absence of any pharmaceutical interventions in the World. However social distancing must be coupled with many other technical aspects for it to yield results especially in Africa and in Zimbabwe in particular. Social distancing without the consideration of other factors is a mere wastage of time and its impact will be felt in the economy rather than reduction of infections. In light of that this paper suggests methods and ways in which social distancing and lock down may be of good help. Strong guidance must be put in place for the informal sector to continue doing their businesses as they are the backbones of the economy in developing countries. Vendors in Zimbabwe has been an issue when the President relaxed some of the stringent measures vendors became a menace at Sakubva market in Mutare exposing themselves to the Corona virus. Therefore the government through their ministries of health should cascade information to the vendors and educate them on how they can make sure that their customers practice social distance when buying and selling.

The policy makers may also consider open air spaces for the vendors rather than closed spaces for adequate ventilation. Demarcations can also be created between the customers and the service providers so that a distance of at least one meter is maintained. The Government of Zimbabwe have tried to implement that measure but the health workers are very few in the Ministry of Health to educate the informal business people who relax when they are not monitored. The Government through the Ministry of Finance should unfreeze recruitment of nurses and environmental health professionals in the country and make sure that they are deployed to do the hygiene education and intensify contact tracing as method to compliment the social distancing. It has been noted that people were still crowding in the shops to buy groceries and the situation was getting worse every day because there is limited time to do the shopping. Shops were opening from 9am and closing at 3pm and people would rush to buy groceries and overcrowding the shops leaving everyone in the shop at risk. The Government should allow the shops to open for a longer period of time to allow social distancing to take place because people will buy at their convenience. This is the only means because Zimbabwe has no capacity to deliver groceries to the people's homes so the need to increase the number of hours people are allowed to buy groceries to avoid overcrowdings in the shops.

It appears from the above discussions that the government has been able to implement the social distancing perhaps in towns because the law enforcement agencies like soldiers and police have been patrolling the streets but not the case with the high density suburbs. Measures of social distancing should be well communicated to the communities because it has been evident that people were still found in the high densities drinking together and in some areas it is impossible to practice social distancing because of the nature of the dwellings where some people stay up to five people in a room. High standards of hygiene should be practiced in the high density suburbs otherwise it will be mere waste of time to say we have social distancing and yet people are overcrowded.

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